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**Bicycle Blitzkrieg: The Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore**

by

**LCDR Alan C. Headrick, USNR**

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Operations Department.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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**Abstract of**  
**BICYCLE BLITZKRIEG: THE MALAYA CAMPAIGN AND THE FALL**  
**OF SINGAPORE**

Japan's December 1941- February 1942 invasion of Malaya and culminating conquest of Singapore is analyzed from an operational perspective. Although overshadowed by better known Pacific Theater actions in World War II, the campaign was Japan's most successful example of joint warfare and replete with lessons for the modern operational commander. Approached from the level of the commander and staff, the background and decision making processes are reviewed, with applicable areas identified for today's leaders. The need for aggressive leadership, accurate intelligence, flexible application of power, adjustment of force based on environmental conditions, and the value of logistics are the major lessons from the Japanese victory. Poor leadership and futility of trying to defend too much are among those lessons from the defeated British.

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## ***Bicycle Blitzkrieg: The Malayan Campaign and the Fall of Singapore***

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

##### ***Thesis:***

Through effective application of the principles of joint warfare, and mastery of the operational art, the Japanese achieved a brilliant victory over the British by their conquest of Malaya and Singapore. Japanese actions in the Malaya campaign were highlighted by powerful leadership, coordination, and innovative planning, training, and execution which provide superb lessons worthy of study by operational commanders.

##### ***Introduction:***

The Imperial Japanese Army's Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita and his 25th Army, outnumbered in some accounts by as much as three to one, opened World War II with an unparalleled accomplishment of arms: conquest of the entire 700-mile Malay Peninsula in 70 days. In the process, Japan's joint forces inflicted a psychologically devastating defeat on the British when they sank the only Royal Navy capital ships in the Pacific; destroyed the allied British, Australian, Indian, and Malayan defenders (while tearing through the "impassable" Malay jungle); and overpowered the "impregnable" Fortress Singapore. This victory would ultimately mark the end of the British Empire in Asia, while the psychological impact of the defeat would stay with Britain throughout the entire war.

The Malaya Campaign, culminated by the fall of Singapore, has been overshadowed by better known Pacific campaigns, such as Pearl Harbor and the invasion of the Philippines. Nevertheless, the operations in Malaya are worthy of study. The Japanese forces demonstrated proficiency in proper and timely

utilization of the tenets of the operational art. This campaign clearly shows the worth of strong command, control, and coordination. It highlights the value of accurate intelligence and unity of purpose. And finally, it points out problems and challenges of warfare that are applicable in the post-Cold War world.

The successful execution of the Malaya Campaign relied upon tactical proficiency and support by each of the armed services. The invasion involved naval convoy support, amphibious landings, naval air cover and bombardment, ground force air support, and ground operations. The jointly planned objectives were well defined and, as a result, tactical commanders were able to support operational requirements without the need for constant guidance. The rapid defeat of the defending force was due in large part to cooperation and coordination between the services.

Of the numerous reasons for the campaign's success, four primary factors stand out above the rest. First, Japan recognized the need for, and obtained, accurate and timely *intelligence* concerning the defenders and the battlefield. Second, Japan was able to exploit the *fortress mentality* of the British and residents of Singapore, who mistakenly placed their confidence in the illusion of the city's invincibility. Third, *planning and preparation* by the Japanese proved far superior to that of the Allied defenders. Finally, the *ingenuity and flexibility* displayed by Japanese commanders and staff personnel resulted in force multiplication through successful deceptions, and ultimately, rapid victory.

## CHAPTER II

### STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL PLANNING

Although avoidance of war with the west had been a major tenet of Japanese foreign policy throughout 1939 and 1940, the possibility of conflict seemed more likely as time passed. By 1941, Japan decided to use force against the United States and Britain to circumvent American economic sanctions levelled against her. Japanese hopes rested upon their ability to seize control of the southern regions of Asia, the so-called Southern Resource Area. With conquest of this vital region, Japan reasoned it would be free of dependence on western powers for essential raw materials. If war came to the Pacific, the region would prove to be of great importance to Japan, who would control materials such as rubber, iron ore, aluminum, and the area's significant petroleum reserves.<sup>1</sup> Malaya, the location of vital materials, and Singapore, Britain's great naval base and symbol of her power in Asia, were keys to control of the Southern Resource Area. Conquest would also give Japan significant advantage in conduct of the war through control of the Malacca Strait, a major choke point between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A final element in the decision to advance on Malaya and Singapore was the desire to "emancipate...oppressed peoples of Asia" from years of British rule.<sup>2</sup>

Intelligence collection for the invasion of Malaya started in January 1941 on the island of Formosa, where a small unit called *The Taiwan Army Research Section* was set up. Headed by Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, its purpose was to determine the requirements for successful tropical and jungle warfare. Over the next six months, the 10 man unit questioned area experts and specialists in all related fields and developed the necessary background for preparing troops to fight in the harsh jungle environment. Based upon his research, Tsuji reached three conclusions regarding the defenses in Malaya:

1. Singapore Fortress was solid and strong facing the sea, but vulnerable on the peninsular side facing the Johore Strait;
2. Newspaper reports of a strong Royal Air Force (RAF) presence were propaganda;
3. Although British forces in Malaya numbered from five to six divisions (well over 80,000 men), less than half were Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

Japan moved closer to war with the west as the Americans tightened economic sanctions in the summer of 1941. On 6 September 1941, the decision was made to invade Malaya, and invasion planning began in earnest. The Naval Staff, fearful for the safety of their ships, wanted the Malayan coastal landing areas softened by prolonged bombardment of British defensive positions and preemptive air attacks. The army, advocating the advantage of surprise, was convinced by intelligence reports that the British would do nothing until war was declared. The argument was eventually resolved when Vice-Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa, Imperial Japanese Navy, Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Squadron, stated,

*I understand the army's desire to land quickly and without prior bombardment. I say that the navy should accept the army's proposals, even at the risk of annihilation.<sup>4</sup>*

General Yamashita agreed with the Southern Squadron Commander, and willingly accepted the risks of the landing in order to capitalize on the element of surprise.

Although not officially appointed to command the operation until 6 November 1941, Yamashita worked on the plans during the preceding months at his headquarters at Samah, a port on Hainan Island in the South China Sea. Initially, five divisions were offered for the invasion. However, Yamashita felt he could accomplish the objectives with only three. Several factors led him to

this conclusion. First, Tsuji's research suggested the peninsula's roads would be the center of the battlefield, and the flanks would extend no more than a kilometer to the left or right due to dense jungle.<sup>5</sup> Second, intelligence reports indicated most of the defending troops were not of the highest calibre. Third, he was aware of the "Japanese habit of flinging more troops into the battle than could possibly be maintained." Yamashita calculated that three divisions was the maximum that could be fed, equipped, and supplied ammunition.<sup>6</sup> Based on this recommendation, the 25th Army was created with three divisions assigned: Lieutenant General Takuro Matsui's 5th Division, Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi's 18th Division, and Lieutenant General Takuma Nishimura's Imperial Guards Division. Supporting the infantry divisions were two regiments of heavy field artillery and the 3rd Tank Brigade. Air cover would be provided by the 3rd Air Division, comprised of 459 aircraft, and supplemented by an additional 159 aircraft from the navy. Naval assets which formed Admiral Ozawa's Southern Squadron included a battle-cruiser, ten destroyers, and five submarines.

The planners at Samah identified five operational objectives which formed the essential phases of the joint land, sea, and air Malaya Campaign:

1. Simultaneous capture of Singora and Patani, Thailand and Kota Bharu, Malaya.
2. Capture of all enemy airfields in southern Thailand and Malaya.
3. Occupation of Kuala Lumpur, Malaya.
4. Occupation of Johore Bahru, and control of Johore Strait.
5. Conquest of Singapore.<sup>7</sup>

Accomplishment of these objectives would require coordination between all the services, and each in succession would support the overall strategic goal of capturing and controlling Southeast Asia.

Interestingly enough, the Japanese had *no experience* in the unique requirements of military operations in a tropical or jungle environment. The army had been engaged in Manchuria since 1931 and was very proficient in cold-weather warfare. Colonel Tsuji's research group hoped to resolve this problem by creating a pamphlet for each of the soldiers to read during transport to Malaya. Called "*Read This Alone-And The War Can Be Won*," it summarized the results of the group's research while explaining the hazards of tropical warfare. Additional steps taken to help gain experience in the conditions expected for the amphibious assaults were rehearsal landings on Kyushu, Canton, and Hainan Island. Each exercise was increasingly similar in scope, geography, and climate to what would be experienced in Malaya.<sup>8</sup>

Colonel Tsuji, appointed Chief of Operations and Planning for the 25th Army, proposed the following plan which was readily approved:

1. *Land the main strength of the 5th Division simultaneously and without warning at Singora and Patani, and at the same time land a powerful section of the 18th Division to attack Kota Bharu.*
2. *The troops disembarked at Singora and Patani to press forward immediately to attack the line of the Perak River and capture its bridge and the Alor Star aerodrome.*
3. *The troops landed at Kota Bharu to press forward along the eastern coast as far as Kuantan.*<sup>9</sup>

The landing at Kota Bharu, the only one in Malaya, was expected to be opposed and very risky. Yet, if successful, it would create a useful diversion away from the main force landings in Thailand.

## CHAPTER III

### BICYCLE BLITZKRIEG

Despite transport scheduling problems and sighting of the invasion force by British reconnaissance aircraft while enroute to the landing area, the initial landing took place at 0215 (local time) 8 December 1941, one hour twenty minutes before the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>10</sup> The landings were highly successful and largely unopposed, except at Kota Bahru where the expected stiff resistance was encountered. The British had previously anticipated the *precise invasion landing points* in a 1937 study done by the then-General Officer Commanding (GOC) of Malaya, Major General W.G.S. Dobbie. He theorized that a future assault would take place during the northeast monsoon season (October through March), when bad weather would limit the reconnaissance capabilities of the defenders. "MATADOR," a defensive plan based on Dobbie's work, was formulated but never executed because the British government did not want to violate Thai sovereignty without a prior declaration of war.

Within four days of their landing, 5th Division had advanced from Singora through the town of Jitra to capture the RAF airfield at Alor Star, nearly 100 miles away. Using flanking techniques developed by Yamashita's staff, the 25th Army swept over town after town and airfield after airfield.<sup>11</sup> There were numerous obstacles to the advance, such as the dense jungle, long supply lines, oppressive heat, and torrential rains, but the quickly over-run enemy positions provided tons of so-called "Churchill Stores:" food, ammunition, trucks, and fuel left by the retreating British.<sup>12</sup> By 11 January 1942, the invasion force had captured Kuala Lumpur.

Influenced by the intense heat and impassable jungle, Japanese planners decided from the beginning to use bicycles rather than horses as a means of troop and light material transportation. This decision allowed the foot soldiers to travel

farther, faster, and with less fatigue. Due to the vast number of rivers on the Malay peninsula, and the British propensity to destroy the more than 250 bridges they crossed during their retreat, bicycles allowed

*the infantry (to continue) their advance, wading across the rivers carrying their bicycles on their shoulders, or crossing on log bridges held up on the shoulders of engineers standing in the stream.*<sup>13</sup>

The British could not escape the troops on bicycles. They were overtaken, driven off the paved roads into the jungle, and forced to surrender. The constant pressure and relentless pursuit was psychologically devastating to the defenders; a true *blitzkrieg*--Japanese-style.

The Japanese southern sweep continued, supplied by captured stores and buoyed by the confidence that battlefield victories provide. When an Australian unit employed an effective counter to Japanese attacks, Nishimura's division began working its way down the coast in a series of sea-borne landings, again outflanking their surprised opponent. By 31 January, the allied defenders had retreated to Singapore, and Yamashita's 25th Army was at Johore Bahru poised for an attack on the "Fortress."

The success of the Japanese force in Malaya was due in part to their unprepared and cooperative enemy. Early victories came against largely Indian units. Their inexperienced British officers did not inspire confidence and often did not speak Urdu, the command language of the Indian army. As a result, poor morale was widespread, and "orders for retreat were too often taken as a pretext for pell-mell withdrawal."<sup>14</sup> Few units were trained, or even interested in learning jungle warfare. More damaging to the British effort was the failure to destroy military facilities, particularly airfields, and the vast amounts of "Churchill stores" which fell into Japanese hands.

For Singapore, however, the most damaging blow was a psychological one inflicted on 10 December 1941. Always confident that rescue would come to the city from the sea, the sinking of the Royal Navy's newly commissioned battleship *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser *Repulse* shocked not only the island fortress, but also the western world. The ships were assigned to Singapore as a symbolic deterrent force but, because of other priorities, were deployed without carrier-based air support. That fatal decision was to have a devastating effect on the United Kingdom, the United States and, most of all, Singapore. About the sinkings, Winston Churchill stated, "In all the war I never received a more direct shock."<sup>15</sup> The myth of British maritime invincibility had been shattered, and with it, any hope for victory in Singapore.

## CHAPTER IV

### FALL OF SINGAPORE

Yamashita took several days to conduct reconnaissance of Johore Strait and allow the troops to regroup prior to his assault on Singapore. During this time, the plan for invasion was developed. The Imperial Guards Division would make a feint attack to the northeast side of Singapore by landing on nearby Palau Ubin Island on 7 February. The 5th and 18th Divisions would remain concealed in the dense jungle until the evening of the 8th, when they would cross Johore Strait onto the northwest side of Singapore Island. Yamashita anticipated the campaign would be over within four days.

Although seemingly unstoppable, having conquered the 700 mile length of Malaya in 55 days, Yamashita was concerned about a possible protracted fight for Singapore. He had good cause to worry. He knew he could lose the upcoming battle for several reasons. First, he had lost over 4,500 personnel thus far and knew his remaining 30,000 men would have their hands full when facing the roughly 100,000 defenders of Singapore under GOC Lieutenant General A.E. Percival. Second, because of the exceedingly long supply lines, he had received little Japanese equipment since early in the campaign. The "Churchill stores" had been significant, but they could not hold out over a prolonged siege. Finally, his ammunition supplies were approaching critically low levels. Prolonged engagement would take him past culmination, and would bring about almost certain defeat. The battle for Singapore had to be finished quickly--and the British had to fall for his bluff.

*My attack on Singapore was a bluff...I knew that if I had to fight long for Singapore, I would be beaten. That is why the surrender had to be at once. I was very frightened all the time that the British would discover our numerical weakness*

*and lack of supplies and force me into disastrous street fighting.*<sup>16</sup>

Across the strait, Percival had concerns of his own. Many of his numerous troops were poorly trained and equipped, largely non-European, and plagued by poor morale. The GOC speculated Yamashita would land in the northeast, but he was also fearfully aware that an attack could come from any corner: land, sea, or air. In response, he opted to attempt defense of the entire 80 mile island coastline.

*The basis of the defence was that the enemy must be prevented from landing or, if he succeeded in landing, that he must be stopped near the beaches and destroyed or driven out by counterattack.*<sup>17</sup>

Defense of such a large area would be difficult for troops with the best training and the highest spirits, and Percival had very few of these. As British troops retreated toward Singapore, they were lifted by the thought of protection within the "Fortress." However, unknown to many of the soldiers, there was no real fortress, save the seaward defenses of the naval base. Percival, aware that only a miracle could save them, attempted to raise the spirits of both soldier and civilian by telling them, "*hold this fortress until help can come-as assuredly it will come...*"<sup>18</sup> In retrospect, help did not come for several years, and for those who died in Japanese prison camps, even that was too late. The defense that was as much a prayer as a plan was not enough to stop the Japanese.

Following the attack on Palau Ubin, the 5th and 18th Divisions proceeded as planned with the assault on Singapore. By sunset, Yamashita had set up his headquarters just north of Tengah airfield, five miles into the island and less than 10 miles from the outskirts of the city. The advance slowed, but the battle continued and damage accumulated. Japanese bombing inflicted significant

damage on Singapore's reservoirs and water supply system. By the morning of 15 February, Yamashita ordered guns to be fired to the last round to keep up the pressure, but it was not necessary. With less than 24 hours of water left to the defending soldiers and one million citizens of the island, Percival had already decided to surrender. At 1810 (local time) 15 February 1942, General Yamashita met General Percival to accept the British surrender of Singapore at the Ford Automobile Factory just outside the city.

## CHAPTER V

### OPERATIONAL ART ANALYSIS

The reasons for Japan's conquest of Malaya and Singapore are numerous. Many writers identify as key to the campaign the total military failure of Percival and the British. Without question, the defenders contributed to their own defeat. They underestimated their enemy. Their intelligence was poor. They fatally dispersed their forces. Their training was inferior. They had no tanks, nor enough aircraft. And their leadership was uninspired.<sup>19</sup> But to reason that Malaya was lost merely by the mistakes of British-led defenders does great disservice to the tremendous accomplishments of the Japanese military forces in this campaign.

Japan dominated their unprepared enemy. Early on they achieved near total supremacy of the air and sea. They effectively achieved the principles of *mass and economy of force* by concentrating their outnumbered forces and gaining local superiority along the axes of attack. They were highly trained and hardened by previous combat experience. The Japanese command structure ensured *unity of effort*, through coordination and proper sequencing of assaults to gain their objectives. Through sound intelligence, careful planning, realistic assessment of risks and enemy morale, and aggressive (though sometimes imprudent) use of initiative, Yamashita was able to secure one of Japan's greatest victories, and inflict one of Great Britain's most devastating defeats.<sup>20</sup>

Through a series of complicated and coordinated maneuvers, Yamashita was able to strike at weak allied defense points with concentrated force. He used the dense jungle to his advantage by overtaking and pushing the enemy off the roadways, severely limiting enemy defensive options, and forcing a choice between a near hopeless fight or surrender. British attempts to defend the entire Malay Peninsula unwittingly assisted Yamashita's efforts, and only heightened

the effectiveness of his concentrated forces. Even when dug-in and well-positioned for a defensive stand, the rapid Japanese advance quickly turned minor allied setbacks into routs. As a result, Japanese forces earned an aura of invincibility in the minds of the defenders; a mental image that persisted in the west for nearly two more years.

The 25th Army, from General Yamashita to the lowest private, was aware of the goals of the campaign and generally how they were to be achieved. Yamashita's coordination ensured attacks were not in conflict with other ongoing Japanese efforts, and that each action would take positive steps towards accomplishment of operational objectives. At the other end of the chain of command, the pamphlet issued to soldiers during the voyage to the theater of operations helped ensure the cold-weather experienced troops would know how to fight in the tropics, as well as why the fight was necessary. In contrast, this unity of purpose and understanding of the objectives was missing on the British side of the front line.

Yamashita maintained a unified and centralized command, but allowed his subordinate commanders decentralized control. By staying focused on the operational and strategic objectives, Yamashita did not get bogged down in tactical details and problems. As a result, commanders were able to quickly and effectively exploit opportunities in any given tactical situation. At times, the actions of Japanese commanders could be termed nothing short of reckless, but in every instance, decentralized control over tactical actions gave the units the opportunity to overcome their mistakes.

The value of accurate, timely intelligence was not lost on the Japanese. Their thorough reconnaissance of the operational theater, and knowledge of British mentality and troop morale provided accurate insight into anticipating potential actions. The work of *The Taiwan Army Research Section*, primarily

intelligence gathering, was the foundation for all Japanese actions throughout the campaign. Deception, maneuver, tactical surprise, and exploitation of Allied weaknesses were standard practices in Malaya. Not only did intelligence prove valuable for offensive action, it also provided a basis for security of Japanese forces and plans.

For Japan, Singapore was both a *strategic* and *operational* center of gravity. *Strategic* because occupation would allow access to the valuable naval base on the island, control of the vital Malacca Strait, and access to the natural resources of Southeast Asia. *Operational* because its fall was key to Japanese victory in the Malaya Campaign. Every effort in the campaign was focused on the ultimate defeat of Singapore. Every tactical action supported this operational objective. The road to the important wealth of Southeast Asia ran through Singapore, and defeat of the island was essential to Japan's overall war effort.

As in all other early operations by Japan in World War II, the Malayan campaign was based on shock and intimidation. Fully aware that the western powers could defeat them in protracted economic war, Japan struck a severe blow at the heart of Western assets in the Pacific in an attempt to compel quick surrender. Through unrelenting application of the principle of offensive initiative, Japan achieved broad success during her early campaigns. Unfortunately, intimidation prompted torture, and abuse of prisoners became commonplace, tarnishing the impressive victory in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps as a result of some lessons from the German *blitzkrieg* (Yamashita had spent six months in Germany and Italy in 1940), the rapid and intimidating Japanese assault was even more successful than they had planned. Recognizing the poor morale and indecisive leadership of his enemy, Yamashita may have hoped exploitation of these decisive points would be sufficient to force surrender prior to invasion of the island. Nevertheless, he recognized the fresh

water reservoirs and supply system as objectives essential to the defeat of the city. By aggressively attacking the defensive forces while showing no indications of the looming ammunition shortage crisis (and his approaching culmination), he captured the decisive water supply. Singapore capitulated a full month earlier than planning had estimated.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Japan used a unique blend of eastern and western military philosophies in preparing for, and conducting the campaign. Application of Clausewitzian principles are evident in several areas. First, Clausewitzian-type objectives were selected, such as capture of cities and airports, and defeat of the Allied army. Second, each objective was an enemy *center of gravity* recognized as vital to campaign victory. Third, the Japanese army focused all its combat power on these objectives--their *direct lines of operation* show that no effort was wasted in the Japanese march toward Singapore. Fourth, General Yamashita conducted a driving search for the *decisive battle*. Both Clausewitz and Yamashita believed in the need to "annihilate the enemy's forces."<sup>21</sup> Finally, Yamashita's sweeping 700 mile advance through Malaya attacked, and broke, the *will* of Singapore's defending forces and citizens.

Equally important was Yamashita's employment of Sun Tzu's theories in each phase of the campaign. From extensive use of *intelligence*, including in-country spies in both Malaya and Singapore, to imaginative use of *deception* to achieve *surprise*, Sun Tzu's influence is apparent. The Malayan Campaign was characterized by other Sun Tzuan principles, such as use of the *indirect approach* through rapid and deep flanking and enveloping movements, employment of *minimum force*, advantageous use of *terrain*, and *speed*--"the essence of war."<sup>22</sup>

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION: SIGNIFICANCE FOR TODAY'S OPERATIONAL COMMANDER

Called by one historian "the greatest triumph in Japanese history,"<sup>23</sup> the conquest of Malaya and Singapore remains impressive. Modern military leaders can learn much from this "forgotten campaign." Although many lessons are woven throughout the Malaya Campaign, the six below are particularly applicable for today's joint force commanders.

First, *aggressive leadership is a force multiplier*. Yamashita's bold and decisive leadership was instrumental in keeping his forces constantly advancing toward their ultimate objective: Singapore. His firm control and clear understanding of own and enemy force capabilities heavily contributed to the success of his calculated risks. His positive outlook boosted morale and led to positive results. Although some choices were risky, his confidence inspiring and aggressive leadership allowed him to seize the initiative and reap big rewards. Unquestionably, Yamashita's leadership, which permeated every aspect of operational planning and execution, was a key to victory.

In contrast, Percival's timid and indecisive leadership produced the opposite effects. By nearly all accounts, Percival was a superb administrator, but certainly not a natural leader. He had difficulty making firm decisions, and those made were often too late. His desire for excessively detailed planning was partly to blame. Percival insisted on following rules and regulations to the letter, no matter how unreasonable or bureaucratic. He was not a forward-looking thinker. For example, he did not insist that his troops train, or become knowledgeable in jungle warfare, even though Singapore bordered dense jungle. A direct result of Percival's poor leadership was that British morale plummeted when the Japanese

began their march down the peninsula. Indeed, Malaya and Singapore were well on their way toward being lost before the first battle was fought.

Although Yamashita's aggressive leadership produced positive battlefield results, his record after victory was less impressive. Unquestionably, the biggest detraction from the campaign was the inability of Japanese leaders to stop the atrocities committed by their soldiers. Control of friendly forces and humane treatment of the vanquished remains vitally important. Activities of military forces, both in and out of combat, will remain of high interest in today's media-intensive world. Political reaction, international relations, and world-wide public opinion will be negatively impacted by irresponsible actions of a nation's military personnel.

Second, *defend only what is defendable and worth defending*. Percival's desire to protect everything had the end result of protecting nothing. Attempts to defend the entire Malay Peninsula and, later, the entire 80 mile coast of Singapore, effectively dispersed critical troops, and violated the *principles of mass* and *economy of force*. British combat power was unnecessarily weakened, *decisive points* were exposed, and *concentration of force* was impossible. Not surprisingly, a crushing defeat followed. British mistakes went far in assist their enemy, and are best summed up by Sun Tzu, "And when he prepares everywhere, he will be weak everywhere."<sup>24</sup>

Third, *acquire the best possible knowledge of the enemy through intelligence*. The intelligence aspect of Japanese operations was accomplished in a near flawless manner. Through knowledge of the mind and capabilities of the enemy, Yamashita effectively used deception in his operational planning. Accurate intelligence allowed thorough knowledge and preparation of the battlefield, which minimized Japanese casualties. His awareness of British vulnerabilities significantly hastened their defeat. For today's commander,

accurate intelligence is still vital. Information can range from a high-tech accounting of enemy troop strength and disposition, to a more mundane, yet critically important, insight into potentially vulnerable enemy infrastructure, such as roads, communications systems, and public utilities.

Fourth, *recognize and incorporate the unique environmental aspects of the battlefield into planning*. The terrain of every battlefield offers potential advantages for exploitation of the enemy. Planners must ensure they use climate, terrain, and other environmental characteristics to their best advantage. Yamashita combined the use of intelligence and the environment to crush the Allies. Not surprisingly, this aspect of the campaign closely followed the Sun Tzu maxim, "Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total."<sup>25</sup>

Flexibility in planning is the fifth lesson: *military objectives are best achieved through flexible and dynamic application of force at the decisive point*. A commander must embrace flexibility as the key to adapting to the environment, changes in the enemy situation, and unforeseen events on the battlefield. Rigidity is normally only beneficial in commitment to an objective. The 25th Army was able to respond to unforeseen situations and overcome difficulties through innovative responses. This flexibility during their *blitzkrieg*-like advance, and their attack of points vital to the defending force, made their march through Malaya unstoppable.

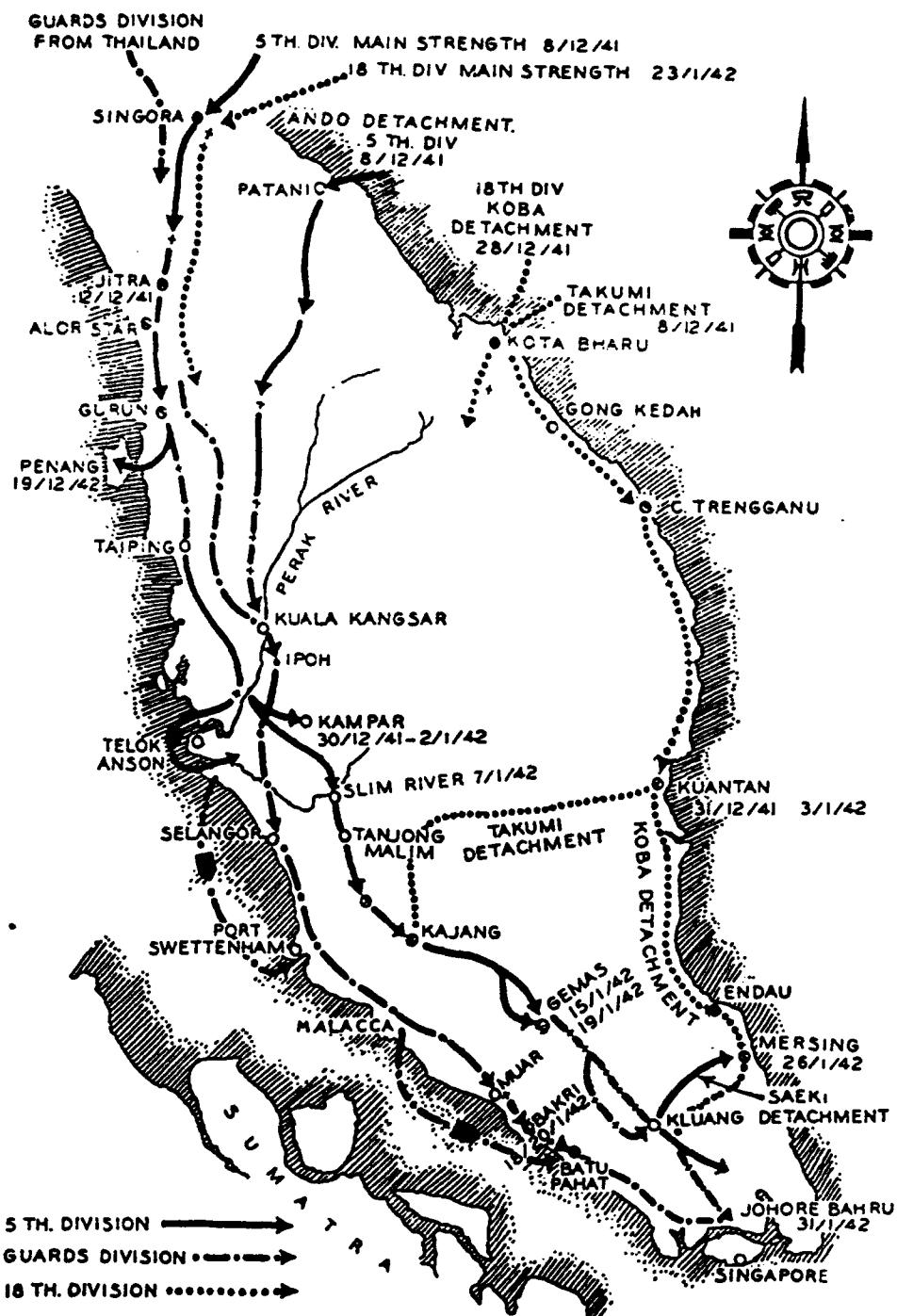
Finally, *logistic support is vital to virtually every campaign*. General Yamashita had serious logistic concerns that, given minor changes, could have cost him the campaign, and meant a much earlier defeat of Japan in World War II. An important historical lesson is that logistic support is the lifeline of a campaign. Logistical problems were primary causes of Athens capitulation to

Sparta after the Battle of Aegospotami, and Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia. More recently, they were a significant factor in America's poorly executed rescue mission in Grenada. A commander's point of culmination, to a large extent, is extended or retracted by his logistic support capability. Logistic support is the very base upon which combat power is built.

The study of Japanese military art in World War II usually tends to center on the more well known Pacific Theater campaigns, and often focuses on their failures. Yet, Japan's conquest of Malaya and Singapore was replete with examples of proper and successful application of the operational art. Japan's brilliantly planned and executed "bicycle blitzkrieg" remains a campaign worthy of study by today's operational commanders.

APPENDIX I  
MAP 1

MALAYA, 1941-1942

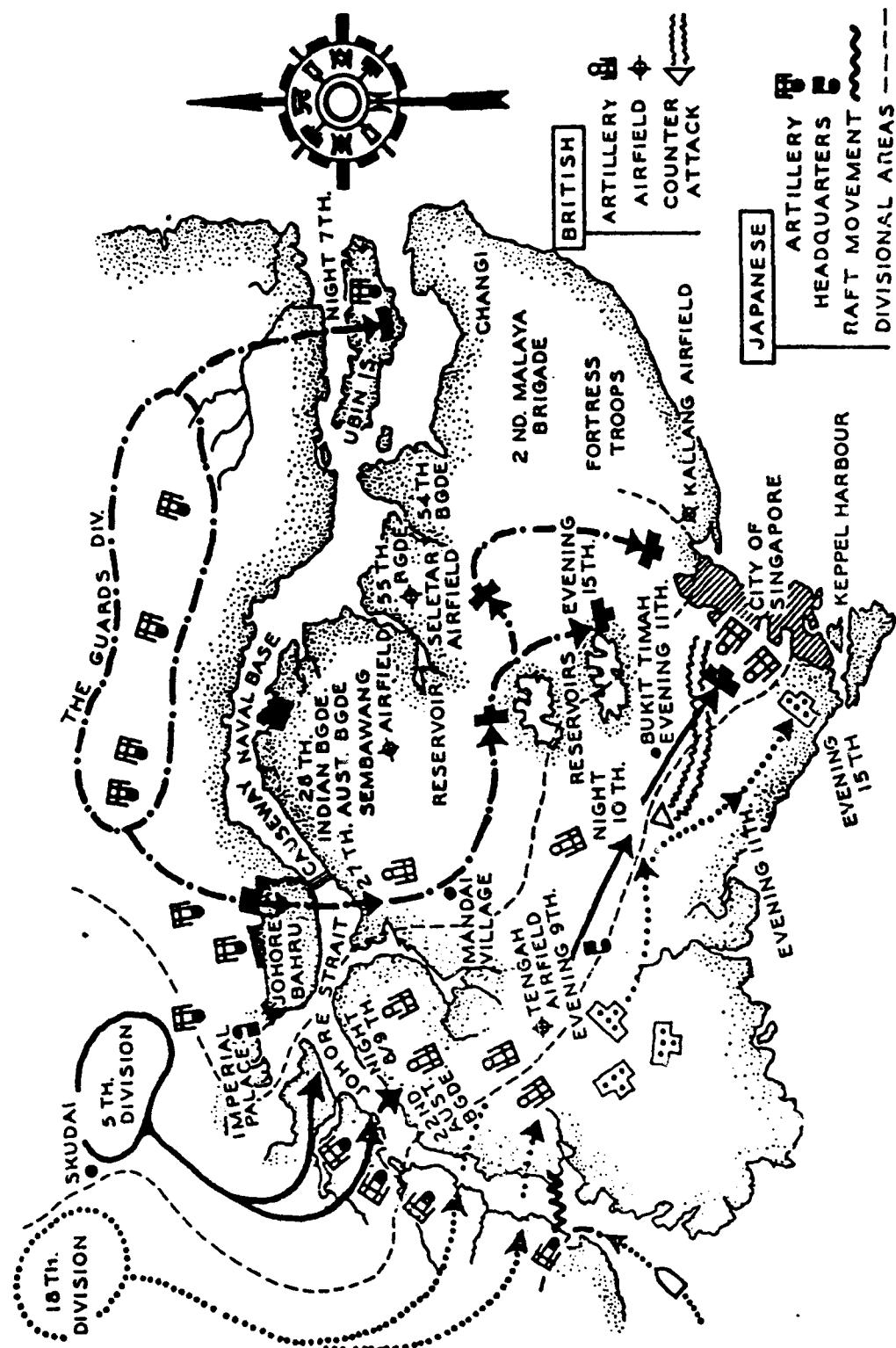


The Malayan campaign of the 25th Army.

Source: Tsuji, M., Singapore: The Japanese Version  
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), p.212

APPENDIX I  
MAP 2

SINGAPORE, 1942



The capture of Singapore.

Source: Tsuji, M., Singapore: The Japanese Version  
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), p. 249

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Masanobu Tsuji, *Singapore: The Japanese Version* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), pp.18-19.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.17.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur Swinson, *Defeat in Malaya: The Fall of Singapore* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), p.18.

<sup>4</sup>Arthur Swinson, *Four Samurai* (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1968), p.94.

<sup>5</sup>Tsuji, p.48.

<sup>6</sup>Swinson, *Four Samurai*, pp.94-95.

<sup>7</sup>Tsuji, p.61.

<sup>8</sup>Kyushu is the southern most of Japan's major islands; Canton and Hainan Island are located in southeastern China. These exercises exposed a number of important points for the upcoming invasion such as the limited value of horses in the jungle and effects of 120+ degree heat on troops packed tightly in ships. The exercises also provided valuable experience for the engineers in bridge repair. Ibid., pp. 9-12.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>10</sup>The invasion was scheduled for 8 December, the first of a series of syncopated strikes in the Pacific to take place within a period of seven hours in the following order: Pearl Harbor (7 December US time due to international dateline), Philippines, Guam, Hong Kong, and Wake Island. See Ibid., p. 70 and John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), pp. 256-257.

<sup>11</sup>The standard Japanese routine for flanking during the campaign was to make a frontal attack by a *third* of the Division's infantry forces, while *two-thirds* made a flanking march to the rear of the enemy. Such tactics, known as the "J" maneuver or "J" tactic, were successful time and again. Swinson, *Four Samurai*, p.105.

<sup>12</sup>Tsuji, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup>An interesting additional benefit to the use of bicycles was their deceptive nature: "When the enemy were being hotly pursued, and time was pressing, punctured tires were taken off and the bicycles ridden on the rims. Numbers of bicycles, some with tires and some without, when passing along the road, made a noise resembling that of tanks. At night when such bicycle units advanced the enemy frequently retreated hurriedly, saying, 'Here come the tanks!' 'It is the tanks, it is the tanks!'" Ibid., pp. 183-184.

<sup>14</sup>Keegan, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup>Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: The Grand Alliance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), p. 620.

<sup>16</sup>J. Bowyer Bell, *Besieged: Seven Cities Under Seige* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Books, 1966), p. 105.

<sup>17</sup>Arthur Percival, *The War in Malaya* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1949), p. 263.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>19</sup>Louis Allen, *Singapore 1941-2* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1979), pp. 186-187.

<sup>20</sup>H.P.Willmott, *Empires in the Balance* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), pp. 172-173.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.243; and Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* Howard, M. and Paret, P., eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 99.

<sup>22</sup>Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Griffith, Samuel B., trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 134.

<sup>23</sup>Swinson, *Four Samurai*, p.112.

<sup>24</sup>Sun Tzu, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

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